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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process of "contemplation writing" for one urban sixth-grade class. The paper describes the daily give-and-take between teacher and students, relates the way in which the teacher instructed his students about how to concentrate and observe before the writing process actually began, discusses the writings that they produced, and elaborates on the success of the writing project. "Contemplation Writing" helps to decrease classroom tension and motivate students to read. It also helps the teacher become more spontaneous, a better listener, and a better discussion leader. (NKA)

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"CONTEMPLATION" STRIKES EMOTIONAL CHORDS WITH KIDS

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It's 12:35 P.M. I'm picking up my 6th-grade class from the cafeteria.* You can cut the heat with a knife. The kids are sizzling. We walk upstairs. I'm waiting for something to happen. Two boys start shoving each other and refuse to stay "hit." Two girls curse out their respective mothers, fathers, and grandfathers. We stop on the fourth floor. We're out of emotional breath. Thoughts of getting back to work again are repugnant to everyone--including the teacher.

We finally get to the room. We're still boiling. In desperation, I reach into my desk drawer and take out a cassette tape of an old Billy Joel album, then put it into the "juke box."

"Get your heads down on the desk and listen!" I bellow. Lights are shut. Shades are drawn. "Sit back and relax," I tell them in a calmer voice. "Don't think about work or anything. Forget the world for a little while."

The tape ran for 15 minutes. We came out of our dreams and I asked the class: "How did you feel while listening to the music? What happened inside yourself?"

The children spoke freely: "I thought I was flying." "My head was heavy." "Everything was like a dream."

Exit Bad Vibes City, alias the cafeteria, and enter the new world of contemplation.

Listening to music continued on a daily basis. Weeks later, I asked them to express their experiences on paper. I told the class: "Tell it

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like it is. There are no right or wrong answers."

The contents--feelings, thoughts, ideas, images, memories, flashbacks, daydreams and poetry--became the subjects of discussions following the music periods. Some fragments from the students' works are: "I imagined being a window and the children threw rocks at me." "Sometimes I don't know whether I'm in a dream or in real life." "I don't want to do contemplation." "I am a loser. I try and try, but I always lose."

I read the writings without naming the authors because the contents were personal. At first I read the pieces aloud and went directly into the next lesson. But the works were so fascinating that I felt more could be gotten from them. For each piece--or "contemplation," I later called it--I made up questions that asked about the images conveyed, feelings created by the images and thoughts triggered, plus the main idea.

After breaking the ice, the kids began responding to, analyzing and discussing their classmates' experiences. These sessions were serious, intense and still fun because of our strong communication--a cross-fertilization of ideas coming from a shared experience. I took our dialogue a step further: "How do you find and see your inner experiences? What process is used to get at the events?"

I began illustrating the process of contemplation on the board: "There's an inner eye--sometimes called the mind's eye--that searches for the images, and thoughts of experience. The mind's eye is like a spotlight illuminating your inside world. When you discover the memories, fantasies, dreams and realities you want to write about, let the light of the mind's eye shine on the event."

"At that moment, carefully study, observe or contemplate the experience before writing. Focus all concentration on your inside world and see what's happening. Find your life as it floats or rushes by the inner eye. Remember that a word, picture, feeling, thought or an idea can become a trigger for creative thinking and writing."

A brave new world arrives. Your students will change. And so will you! Classroom tension decreases. Your class will become up-toned and cerebral.

"Contemplation Writing" motivates students to read because the skills derived from the program are needed for this subject, too. Thinking, feeling, visualizing, sensing, experiencing, creating, concentrating and communicating transfers to reading--making it enjoyable, meaningful and understandable.

At the end of the project, I returned the writings to the students and checked their involvement with contemplation through a questionnaire. Some responses were: "Contemplation helped me by taking the 'I am scared' out of reading. Contemplation helped me to concentrate." "I like to write about fantasies because they are fun to read. I enjoy fantasies because they are like a book you read." "I enjoy these periods because I could read about the good and bad in my life and solve the problems."

I am only touching the tip of the iceberg of my program. "Contemplation Writing" was the foundation for teaching revision, character education and emotional intelligence. I realized that children like to correct personal writing. A simple "sound-and-sense" approach taught the students how to revise their work both individually and collaboratively.

To give children more insight into their experiences, I fed them

quotations for interpretation. Each saying expanded itself down unknown avenues that brought out new ideas and perceptions for living and dealing with others.

I also tested the children's progress in emotional intelligence with "Contemplation Comprehension." This is like reading comprehension, only they are figuring out a contemplation with questions similar the ones used during our discussions.

"Contemplation Writing" blossomed into a bigger project called "Experiences, Reflections, and Insights." The new program added various "Experimental Contemplations featuring specific themes.

"Contemplation Writing" will affect you, as it does your students, by helping you become more spontaneous, a better listener, and a better discussion leader. You will draw knowledge out of your students instead of pounding it into them. Enhancing your capacity as a communicator and artist will bring down the walls between you and your class because everyone will actually stop to see each other.

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